



WISCONSIN COUNCIL ON INVASIVE SPECIES

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The Making of 'Purple Wastelands': A European Wildflower Takes Over Wisconsin's Wetlands

MADISON -- The following represents a real-life scenario taking place across Wisconsin:

- Landowner plants pretty purple flower in their garden.
- Rainwater carries seeds from flower into the curbside gutter and to the local lake, where seeds germinate, and plants grow and spread.
- Naturalized flower takes over the shorelines and wetlands surrounding lake, choking out native grasses, sedges and flowers— *purple wastelands*.
- Waterfowl, fish and other wildlife that rely on this wetland habitat disappear.

What is this pretty but invasive European wildflower? Purple loosestrife. It was introduced as a garden perennial from Europe during the 1800's. It now can be found throughout the United States and Canada, and in all 72 Wisconsin counties. As an invasive species, purple loosestrife is a concern of Governor Jim Doyle. "Wisconsin's wetlands are important to preserve for so many reasons," Doyle stated. "They filter pollutants, they control flooding and they serve as important habitat for waterfowl and fish. We must work together in protecting our wetlands from purple loosestrife and other invasive species."

Lacking the natural controls that keep it in check in Europe, purple loosestrife grows faster and taller than our native wildflowers and reproduces prolifically, effectively choking out all other wetland plants. Apart from destroying important habitat for native plants, birds and other wildlife, this wildflower can diminish recreational opportunities in wetlands for hunting, fishing and nature appreciation. It may even impede boat travel. Governor Doyle cautions that "hunting, fishing and boating are vital to our state's economy and our citizens' happiness. It's time to find ways to limit the invasion of purple loosestrife in our waterways to protect our natural resources for future generations." By law, purple loosestrife is a nuisance species in Wisconsin, meaning it is illegal to sell, distribute, or cultivate the plants or seeds, including any of its cultivars.

Purple loosestrife is a perennial herb 3-7 feet tall with a dense bushy growth of 1-50 stems. Showy flowers vary from purple to magenta, possess 5-6 petals clustered into numerous long spikes, and bloom from July to September. Leaves are opposite, nearly linear, and attached to four-sided stems. It has a large, woody taproot with underground runners that form a dense mat. This plant's optimal habitat includes marshes, stream margins, floodplains and wet meadows, although established plants can tolerate drier conditions. A single stalk can produce from 100,000 to 300,000 seeds per year.

What can Wisconsin citizens do to help fight the purple wastelands?

- **Learn to identify purple loosestrife.**
- **Prevent the spread.** Find and remove pioneering plants or isolated small colonies, especially in areas otherwise free of loosestrife. When removing plants, take care not to leave stems or cuttings that can resprout or disperse seed. Dispose of plants/seeds in a capped landfill, or dry and burn them. Rinse all equipment (boats, trailers, etc.), clothing and footwear used in infested areas before moving into uninfested areas.
- **Volunteer to Eradicate or survey for Established Populations.** Citizen action is critical, as many infestations are on private property. Methods may include digging/hand-pulling, cutting, herbicide application, introduction of biocontrol beetles that eat purple loosestrife, or any combination therein, depending on the size of the infestation and available resources.
- **Spread the Word!** Help neighbors understand the importance of removing the plant from their garden or wetland. A curriculum guide is also available for educators who can direct their students in the rearing and release of purple loosestrife-eating biocontrol beetles.

For more information on these citizen actions, as well as on other invasives species, see: <http://dnr.wi.gov/invasives> or write: WI-DNR, Bureau of Endangered Resources, Invasive Species Program, 101 South Webster Street, P.O. Box 7921, Madison, WI 53707. The DNR website also has digital photos available for media reproduction.

Text for this news release was provided by the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Bureau of Endangered Resources.

This news release is sponsored by the Wisconsin Council on Invasive Species. The Wisconsin State Legislature created the Council, to which Governor Doyle appointed 13 members. The Council's mission is to prevent and reduce the harmful impacts of invasive species on Wisconsin's environment and economy, as well as human well-being. Funding for this news release was provided by the Wisconsin Coastal Management Program and the Natural Resource Foundation's C.D. Besadny Conservation Grant Program.